

# NIGHTCLUB PHOTOGRAPHY

Professional Club Photography Training Course

# 101



# SECRETS FROM A PRO

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# A. Introduction

Welcome to Nightclub Photography 101! If you've been searching for clear, simple, & informative instructions on how to take amazing nightclub and concert photos, you've come to the right place. When I was trying to teach myself nightclub & concert photography many years ago I found it frustrating that there wasn't a simple guide out there to show me what to do, and what not to do. I'd search internet forums and blogs scrounging to find little tidbits of information here and there, but not all of it was good information, and it took up way too much of my valuable time searching through all the clutter to find all the good stuff. I yearned for someone to just flat out tell me: "To take this kind of nightclub photo, do this. To take that kind of concert photo, do that".

Nightclub & concert photography is such a small & specialized discipline; it was hard finding good solid information about the practice. Nightlife photography techniques weren't taught in school or any books, so I had to learn the difficult way. I taught myself over the years, using trial and error. But the many years of practice eventually

paid off, as nightlife & concert photography is now what I do professionally. I've been a working, published Nightlife Photographer for over 5 years. I've photographed hundreds of concerts, festivals, and DJ events over the years. I regularly get published in major national, and recently, international magazines. I have learned many techniques for taking great nightclub & concert photos in all kinds of situations, and this guide is intended to share my knowledge with you, so you can learn to take great nightclub & concert photos too. I designed this guide to be as user friendly as possible. You won't find too much techno-babble about photography. If you like that kind of thing, there are many great books that go over the basic principles of technical photography. Pick one up. But this guide is geared towards nightlife & concert photos only. It is a cut and dry description of the nightclub & concert photography techniques I have been using over the years to create great photos in harsh, dark, crowded, action packed nightclub environments.

There is some good money in nightclub & concert photography if you know what you're doing and know the right way to market yourself. Some people do it full time, while others use it to supplement their

daytime jobs. This guide will get you started in the right direction to make a career out of nightclub & concert photography if you think it is something you have an interest in. There are some great benefits to becoming a nightlife photographer too. Backstage access to your favorite bands & DJs is always a plus, the best seat in the house during performances, meeting new people every night, and travel opportunities too. But the first step in all of this is learning how to take those spectacular nightclub & concert photos that everyone wants, so let's get started!

## **B. Nightlife Photo Equipment**

There are some people that think anyone can take great nightclub photos if they just get top of the line expensive photo equipment. That is the farthest thing from the truth. You don't need the most expensive photography gear to take amazing nightlife photos. But, like any profession, top-of-the-line professional gear can make work easier and does have some quality benefits, but it's not absolutely necessary. Although if you want to make money with your nightlife & concert photos, you can't use a little Point & Shoot camera

that fits in your pocket. I'll go over some different gear setups for you here, their benefits, and depending on your budget you can choose which setup is best for you.

The only requirements for taking good nightlife & concert photos is that you have a Digital SLR Camera that allows you to manually control its settings. A good strong flash is recommended for nightclub situations, but many concerts may not allow flash photography, so you may want to put your money into a nice low-light lens rather than a flash, if you plan on shooting concerts. There are many different brands of Digital cameras out there, and they are all pretty similar. I personally use Canon Digital SLR cameras, so I'll base my examples on that brand. But most other camera brands have models similar to the ones I'll go over with you here. *If you use a brand other than Canon, you can just look up the Nikon or Olympus equivalent of the gear I go over in the guide using Google.*



# NIGHTLIFE GEAR SETUP A

Low Budget

Canon Digital Rebel XTi

Kit Lens

Canon 430ex Flash

Stofen Flash Diffuser



This is the low budget Nightclub Photography gear setup. While it's low budget, you can still get some amazing photos from it. At the time of this writing, this setup will run you about \$900. This is the gear I first started with, and I have nothing but great things to say about it. The [Canon Rebel XTi](#) has all the settings and resolution you need for



taking some great nightclub photos, and the Kit lens that comes with it works ok in low light conditions. It's 18-55mm zoom lens will work well for both wide angle crowd shots as well as close ups of party people or performers.

The [430ex Speedlight Flash](#) is powerful and cheap, it also has 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync technology which is recommended for capturing clear, crisp "slow shutter speed" photos. Don't worry, I'll go over 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync and slow shutter speeds later on in the guide.

A flash diffuser, if you don't know, is used to scatter the light of the flash and "diffuse" it. It helps spread the light out evenly, and produces in a softer, less harsh light on your subjects. It reduces overly bright "hot spots" that can show up on a subject's nose or forehead due to sweating. It is a must in a dark nightclub environment, unless you want your subjects to look like deer caught in headlights. There are many different types of diffusers out there, but the [Stofen Omnibounce Diffuser](#) is what I highly recommend for a beginner.

# NIGHTLIFE GEAR SETUP B

Mid Budget

Canon EOS 40D

Canon 17-55mm f2.8 IS Lens

Canon 580ex II Flash

OC-E3 Off Camera Shoe Cord

Stofen Flash Diffuser



This is a medium budget Nightclub Photography gear setup. At the time of this writing, this setup would run you about \$2500.

This setup has some greater benefits over the low budget setup. First off, the [Canon EOS 40D](#) camera body has a brighter viewfinder and more focus points, which really helps when trying to focus on subjects in a dark nightclub atmosphere. It also has greater noise reduction at high ISO settings (if you don't know what that means, don't worry. I'll go over it later). It has better battery life, and a bigger, brighter LCD screen for viewing your photos. It also has "Live View" technology, allowing you to use the LCD to compose your image rather than looking through the viewfinder. I'll go over why this can be helpful later on in the guide.

The [Canon 17-55mm f2.8 IS Lens](#) has quite a few benefits over the kit lens. The lens has a maximum aperture of f2.8, which means it can take in more light than a kit lens. The f2.8 lens can take better low light photographs, perfect for a nightclub situation. Lenses with a larger aperture (smaller f number) are sometimes referred to as "fast" lenses. This lens also has Image Stabilization technology, or "IS". This means the lens has a little motor in it that helps compensate for camera shake. Nikon's version of this technology is called Vibration

Reduction or “VR”. If you are holding your camera to take a photo, your hands can’t stay perfectly still, which results in some “camera shake” that can blur a photo. A lens with “IS” or “VR” technology works to fix this. Camera shake doesn’t make much of an impact in daylight photography, but it can make a huge impact in low light photography, because the camera’s shutter speed is slower which means it stays open longer. The longer the shutter stays open, the more your shaking hands can blur a photograph. Your photos will come out sharper at night with an Image Stabilization or Vibration Reduction equipped lens. It is a particularly great feature to have for nightclub & concert photography.

The [Canon 580ex II](#) flash is bigger and more powerful than the 430ex in our low budget gear setup. This lets you get more light farther away in a big club. It also has a better infrared focusing system than the 430ex. The infrared beam that comes out of the flash unit before you take a photo helps you focus your camera on subjects in the dark more easily.

Finally, the [Off Camera Shoe Cord](#) allows you to move your flash around rather than having it attached to the top of the camera the whole time. The benefit of this is to be able to get more interesting and varied lighting conditions for your photos. I'll go over some techniques for off camera flash placement later on in the guide.

# NIGHTLIFE GEAR SETUP C

Big Budget

Canon EOS 5D Mark II

Canon 16-35mm f2.8L Lens

Canon 580ex II Flash

Canon ST-E2 Wireless Transmitter

Gary Fong Lightsphere II



## **Canon EOS 5D Mark II**

The ultimate nightclub & concert camera is the new Canon EOS 5D Mark II. It can take amazing photos at high ISO speeds, without much noise, which makes it perfect for nightclub photography. It also takes HD video, so you can provide your clients with more than just photos if needed.

## **Canon 16-35mm Super Wide Angle f2.8 L Series Lens**

The professional L Series lenses have superior image quality resulting in crystal clear, super sharp photos. The [Canon 16-35mm f2.8 L](#) takes incredible super wide angle crowd shots that will make your photos really stand out, but still lets you zoom in a bit to get a close up of a DJ or singer. This is a perfect lens for nightclub photography.

## **Canon STE2 Speedlite Transmitter**

The [Canon STE2 Transmitter](#) lets you take your flash off your camera and put it wherever you want to, the transmitter will trigger the flash wirelessly when you take a photo. You can get creative with your



light placement (like putting the flash down on a table or having someone else hold it).

## **Gary Fong Lightsphere II**

The Gary Fong Lightsphere is a fantastic light diffuser for your flash. It bounces the light at your subjects in a very clean & even way, helping to reduce “hot spots”. It spreads the light over their whole body too, so you get good detail in their outfits as well as their faces.

## **Other Notable Gear:**

These 3 setups are not the only setups available for great nightclub photography. There are many different combinations of camera bodies, lenses, flashes, and other accessories that you can add to your kit. Here is some more gear I recommend:

### **Canon 1D Mark III Body**

The [Canon 1D Mark III](#) is Canon’s top of the line professional camera body. Some benefits relevant to nightclub photography include: Even brighter viewfinder and more focus points. Super low

noise at high ISO settings, which can be great for concert situations that don't allow a flash to be used. This baby is incredibly expensive though, and heavy to lug around a nightclub.

### **Canon 70-200mm f2.8 IS Lens**

The [Canon 70-200mm f2.8 IS Lens](#) is a fantastic low light telephoto zoom lens with Image Stabilization for getting close up photos of performers who are far away from where you are standing. It is ideal for great concert photography.

### **Canon EF 50mm F1.2L USM Lens**

The [Canon 50mm f1.2 L](#) is an extremely low light ("fast") lens that works magic if you're not allowed to use a flash. You can also get some great "bokeh" background blur to make your subject stand out. A fantastic way to get good shots using a venue's ambient lighting. Cons are it's price, and the fact that you are fixed at 50mm. You have to move around more because you are unable to zoom this lens.

## **Canon Fisheye EF 15mm F2.8 Lens**

The fisheye effect from the [Canon Fisheye 15mm f2.8](#) can create some stunning images of large nightclub & concert crowds. Those greats shots that look like a “warped sea of people”. It can be unflattering on individuals though, so you’ll want to use more than just this lens during a show.

## C. General Terms

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of nightclub & concert photography, I want to go over some general photography terms that I use in this guide.

- ISO
- Camera or Sensor Noise
- Aperture (f-stop)
- Depth of Field
- Shutter Speed
- 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync
- Auto & Manual Flash

Feel free to skip this section if you are already an experienced photographer.

### **ISO:**

ISO denotes how sensitive your camera's image sensor is to the amount of light present. The higher the ISO setting, the more sensitive

the sensor is to light, allowing photos to come out better in low light situations. However, high ISO settings can reduce image quality with reduced detail and increased sensor noise. You want to try and capture photos at the lowest ISO speed possible to keep detail & quality high.

### **Camera or Sensor Noise:**

As mentioned above, high ISO settings create some sensor noise. Sensor noise is that grainy, “snow” like effect you get in photos. The higher your ISO setting, the more noise you get in a photo. Noise makes photos look like crap. Nightclub and concert photographers regularly use high ISO settings, and many use noise reduction software that help reduce noise in photo post processing. I go over my favorite noise reduction software later in this guide.

### **Aperture (f-stop):**

Aperture is the size of the opening that let's light into the camera. It is something that can confuse many new photographers. Aperture can affect the amount of light the camera captures, as well as an

image's Depth of Field. Aperture is described in "f-stop" numbers. A small f-stop number indicates a large aperture. So an aperture of f2.8 is *larger* than an aperture of f16, meaning the opening to the camera is larger. A large aperture lets in more light than one that is smaller. Larger apertures like f2.8 can be great for nightclub photography because letting more light in is beneficial in a dark nightclub environment.

### **Depth of Field:**

Aperture also affects Depth of Field. A large aperture like f2.8 creates a *small* depth of field. A small depth of field means only a small part of the photo is in focus, like a single person's face. On the reverse, a small aperture like f16 creates a *large* depth of field. A large depth of field means a large part of the photo is in focus, like a whole group of 8 people posing together. Aperture & depth of field can be confusing to new photographers, so read these descriptions over again a few times and practice using the different settings on your camera so you can see the difference for yourself.

## **Shutter Speed:**

Shutter speed is the length of time the camera's shutter remains open. The longer a shutter stays open, the more light enters a camera. Nightclub and concert photographers generally use longer shutter speeds because of the low light environment they shoot in. But with longer shutter speeds comes the possibility of blurring. For example, when taking a photo of people dancing, a semi fast shutter speed of  $1/60^{\text{th}}$  of a second will freeze the action of the dancers, while a slow shutter speed of 1 second will allow motion blur to occur in the photo. A nightclub or concert photographer has to be aware of what different shutter speeds will do to their photos. Faster shutter speeds are recommended for moving subjects like dancers & performers, while slower shutter speeds can capture more ambient light when taking shots of people who pose in place. There is a trick to using slow shutter speeds and still freezing action that I go over with you later in this guide.



## **1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync:**

First & Second curtain sync are flash settings. They can also be called Front & Rear curtain sync, respectfully. The standard setting for all flashes is 1<sup>st</sup> curtain sync. This means the flash fires at the beginning of an exposure, right after the camera's shutter first opens. Some higher end flashes also have a 2<sup>nd</sup> curtain sync setting. This means a flash will fire at the end of an exposure, right before the camera's shutter closes. There is not much difference when using fast shutter speeds, but these settings can create different effects when using long (slow) shutter speeds. With long shutter speeds, 1<sup>st</sup> curtain sync will fire the flash right away, freezing the action, then the shutter stays open capturing any additional light and motion. In 2<sup>nd</sup> curtain, the shutter opens first capturing ambient light and motion, then the flash fires at the end freezing action. Having a flash that can do 2<sup>nd</sup> curtain sync is very beneficial in nightclub photography, as I will go over later in the guide.

## **Auto & Manual Flash:**

Another important flash setting I want to go over is Auto vs. Manual flash settings. With a flash set in Auto mode, the flash will try to determine the output of light to use for a photo. In Manual flash mode, you manually set the flash output to use. If you are new to nightclub and concert photography, I generally recommend that you leave the flash on Auto. You'll have your hands full worrying about settings on your camera like ISO, Aperture, and Shutter Speed. But once you know these settings like the back of your hand, you can start using your flash in Manual mode to achieve more interesting & attractive exposures in different situations. Sometimes a low flash output combined with a long shutter speed can create some spellbinding images. But getting used to flash output in relation to the other settings you'll be using can take a lot of practice. Only experiment with manual flash output once you're a pro with everything else.

## **D. Nightlife Photo Challenges**

Nightclub and concert photography is one of the hardest types of photography there is. Nightclub photographers have to maneuver packed club environments, dodging people and drinks as they try to find a good shot. A club or concert photographer may only have 5 or 10 seconds to pose their subjects in a club environment, if at all, while a fashion photographer has all the time in the world to direct a model. In a Fashion shoot, you can instruct the model however you want. Nightclub patrons are often drunk or high, and can't listen to your instructions over the loud music making it hard to direct them in any way.

Next, the lighting in nightclubs & concerts is almost never constant, always changing and moving. Photography is all about light, so not having control of the lighting makes club & concert photography very difficult. For example: in a fashion photo shoot, the photographer will have total control of the lighting, and is able to shoot photos when the lighting is perfect. Not so in the nightclub environment. A photographer has to read changing light on the fly, with no control of

what the lighting will look like next. A light meter is completely useless in a nightclub setting, because as soon as you get a reading the light conditions will have changed already.

Finally, trying to compose a great shot is extremely difficult in a nightclub as your drunken subjects move and jostle about. They switch positions too fast, before you can even get a shot off. Other people constantly walk into the frame not realizing it, while some people walk into the frame on purpose! Make no mistake; nightclub & concert photography can be a full contact sport. But I have learned over the years there are ways to minimize the challenges of nightlife photography.

### **Subject Direction:**

In a loud, busy and dark nightclub environment it can be hard to direct your subjects without screaming at them. Why do you want to direct people? Maybe they are standing in an area with little to no ambient light. Maybe they are next to a trash can. Maybe they are not close enough to each other to get everyone in the frame. The key to getting people to do what you want in the club environment is with

hand signals. Want to ask someone if it's ok to take their photo? Point at them and then at your camera. Want to move a group under some good lighting? Point up at the lights, shake your camera or your head, then point to where you want them to move to. If they don't get it, take their photo where they currently stand, then show it to them, and tell someone in the group you can do better if they move to a better lit area. If they still don't understand, smile and move on.

### **Analyzing Nightclub Lighting:**

Using your camera's internal light meter to determine the correct exposure settings or even using a hand held meter can be frustrating in a nightclub. The light changes so fast that a meter is virtually useless. So nightclub photographers have to get the hang of measuring ambient light on the fly with their own eyes. When you're first starting out, this is incredibly difficult. But after shooting in clubs for a while, you'll get the hang of it with practice.

The first step to obtaining a correct exposure in a nightclub environment is to take a few test shots. Your camera should be in

Manual Mode, so you have full control of Aperture, Shutter Speed, and ISO settings. You don't want your camera making these choices for you, as it is often wrong in the dark, light changing environment of a club or concert. Once you've taken a test shot, review it and figure out if the shot is too dark, or if the subject is blown out (over exposed).

You have 3 different settings to play with until you get it right. You will be better off trying to adjust only one setting at a time. For example, if the photo is too dark, I'll first try slowing the shutter speed down to let in more light, or increasing the power of my flash. If after some more test shots it still isn't coming out the way I want, I'll try to adjust my aperture to achieve the correct exposure. Opening the aperture (reducing the f number) will let in more ambient light. If it's still too dark, or too blurry, I'll raise my ISO setting as a last resort.

There is quite a bit of trial and error in this process. Once you get the settings where you want them, lock it in and memorize it. Canon's higher end models like the 40d and 5d have a nifty feature allowing a user to save 3 different camera settings to 3 different spots on the dial. So when you find a setting that works well for close ups in that particular nightclub, save it in your camera under a user setting.

Save good settings for shots of performers, and crowd shots too. All three will have different settings that work the best in that particular club. If you don't have a camera that lets you save settings, memorize them or write them on your wrist with a marker. These saved settings may not work every time in every part of the club as the lighting changes, but they serve as a base for you to adjust as needed throughout the night.

## **E. Camera Settings: Basics**

In this section of the guide I will go over what settings I use for what situations, and why. The actual setting may not be perfect for the nightclub you happen to be in, as lighting is different for every venue. But they should serve as a starting point to help you get started in adjusting for the venue you happen to be in.

Before I get into the different photo situations, I want to cover the base settings I use to set up my camera and flash for any nightclub or concert photography I plan to do. First, do not use a UV lens filter if you can help it. Some photographers use a filter to help protect their



lens in the rowdy nightclub environment, but it reduces the amount of light that your camera can capture, as well as making it harder to see through your viewfinder. In a dark club, you need to have the brightest viewfinder you possibly can. A good hard plastic lens hood should be plenty of protection for your expensive camera lens. I do highly recommend using a lens hood for protection, as drunk kids will push and bump into your camera quite a bit. Should you drop your camera; a good hood will protect the glass pretty well. Just don't drop it "lens first" on a pointy object!

For my Auto Focus settings, I like to use the AI Focus AF setting. This changes the Auto Focus from One Shot AF to AI Servo AF depending on what my subjects are doing. For people that are standing still and posing for me, the camera will focus in One Shot AF mode. For people who are dancing and moving around, it will focus in AI Servo AF mode. There are also some situations where I will turn off AF and focus the lens manually. I will do this for some large crowd shots or DJ shots, generally if my auto focus is not focusing on what I want it to in the dark.

I usually set my focus point to focus using the center point. This way I can use my camera's "focus lock" button to focus on a subject's face with the center point, then re-compose the shot to my liking before pressing the shutter.

I keep my White Balance setting on Auto. The camera generally picks the best WB setting for me in nightclub situations, and if it doesn't, it's easy to fix in Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Bridge in post processing. I also leave the camera's Metering Mode on Evaluative Metering, but I only use the internal light meter to help get a very general idea if an exposure will be too dark or too bright. You can't trust your light meter in a nightclub. I always leave my camera in Manual Mode when taking nightclub or concert photos for total control of ISO, Aperture, and Shutter Speed settings.

I set my flash on Auto and 1<sup>st</sup> Curtain Sync for some nightclub photos, or Manual and 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync for others. I'll go over when and why I use each later on in the guide.

These are the basic camera settings I use for my nightclub photography. Next, we'll go over how to create different effects for certain types of nightlife photos using ISO speed, shutter speed, and aperture settings with your camera.

## F. Camera Settings: Close-Ups



F = 5.0 / Shutter = 0.4 sec / ISO = 800 / Flash = 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync

Close-Up shots of party people are probably the most important shots you can take in nightclub photography. Why? Because many

times the reason you get hired as a nightclub photographer is to get great shots of individuals and small groups of people, so that these people can find themselves on the nightclub or concert promoter's website after the party. Nightclub photographers can drive a ton of traffic to websites this way. That traffic is worth money to a promoter. So you want to get really good at taking these types of shots.

A great way to take really interesting and dynamic close-ups is to make sure there are colorful club lights behind your subjects. By using longer shutter speeds (like 0.5 sec or even 1 sec) along with your flash in 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync mode, you can capture some great color in the background while still keeping your subjects crisp and sharp in the foreground. The shutter stays open for a while, capturing all the colorful ambient light in the background, and the flash fires right at the end of the exposure, freezing your subjects still. The aperture set at f4.0 (as in the above photo) gives some blurring of the background while still open wide enough to get some good color and light through your lens. Notice there are only 3 subjects in the above photo, and the guy is slightly out of focus. With larger groups of people, you want to close the aperture up a bit (maybe set to around f6.3), to make sure

everyone in the photo is in focus. Just remember that closing the aperture will make the photo come out darker, so either lengthen your shutter speed or increase your ISO to compensate.

You will have to take some test shots to determine the best shutter speeds to use for the particular club you happen to be in, or depending on what the light tech is doing to the lights. With very bright lights, you can use faster shutter speeds to minimize blurring, but with dimmer lighting, you'll need to slow down the shutter to capture good ambient colors and achieve a good exposure.

If a couple wants you to take their photo in a nightclub, but there aren't any good club lights behind them, try directing them to a different spot where you can get some good ambient light in the background. This could be difficult depending on their attention span or how drunk they might be, so don't try too hard. If they understand what you are saying above the loud music, great. If not, take their photo where they are and move on.

Make sure to switch up your angles. Taking shots of couples and small groups from the same angle every time gets boring quickly. To liven up the party gallery, make sure to take shots from many different angles. Sometimes extreme close-ups can work well. Kneeling on the ground and shooting from some lower angles can look good, as long as your subjects are looking down at you. If they are looking up and away, you'll get unflattering shots of their nostrils. I also like to "shoot from the hip" and just raise the camera over my head and take a few shots without composing them from my viewfinder. In the beginning, shooting from the hip can result in some really bad photos. But keep at it, and you'll get the hang of what the shot will look like just from where your camera is aimed. If you have a camera body with "Live View", you can enable it to better see what you're shooting at using the camera's LCD.

Some people at clubs don't like to have their photo taken. Maybe they are not supposed to be at that club, or are with someone they are not supposed to be with. Don't snap photos of people who clearly do not want their photo taken. That can get you into fights and other problems real quick. I always try to ask people if they mind or not. It is

much more professional. Sometimes you'll get attention whores (guys or girls) who will want you to take like 20 photos of them. I'll play along for about 3 or 4 shots, and then I'll tell them I have to go to the bathroom or something as an excuse to move on. Even better, tell a camera hog that you need to leave and go get a drink, and they may end up offering to buy your drink for you.

Always remember that close-up shots of couples and groups can be the most important shots to get. These are the photos that will drive traffic to a clients website (and your own), which in turn makes your client money. The crowd shots and performer shots balance out the gallery, but the close-ups of the people at the club should always be given special care. If you can get good at taking these kinds of photos, it will be much easier to make a living with your nightclub photography.

## G. Camera Settings: Large Crowds



F = 6.0 / Shutter = 1/10 sec / ISO = 1600 / Flash = Off

The next type of nightlife photos that you should be taking are crowd and atmosphere type shots. These photos let people know how big the club is, how packed it was, and give a colorful representation of the light show that was going on at the time. In a party gallery of 30 photos or so, you'll want to include at least 3 or 4 of these.



You'll generally want to set a smaller aperture, like f5.0- f6 if you can get away with it. This ensures a larger part of the photo is in focus. You'll also want a faster shutter speed to help freeze motion, especially because you won't be using your flash most of the time for these shots. The exact setting will depend on the light situation at that particular club. You also want to set a higher ISO setting; I like mine to be from ISO 800 to 1600 for crowd shots. You may get a little sensor "noise" in the photo, but you'll need the high ISO to make the shot come out bright enough. Again, the exact settings will be up to how bright it is in the club, and what the light tech is doing with the lighting system at the time. So make sure to shoot test shots to find which settings seem to work best for your particular environment. When you find a good basic setting, memorize it and snap away!

You can take some great crowd shots without using your flash if you have a good "fast" low-light lens, a camera body that doesn't produce much "noise", and a high ISO setting. Try experimenting with ISO settings of 1000 and even 1600+ for flash-less crowd shots. You may have to do a little noise reduction in post processing, but these photos can look incredible. I'll go over post processing techniques in a

later section. Below is an example of a crowd/club atmosphere type shot I took without my flash:



F = 4.0 / Shutter = 0.4 sec / ISO = 600 / Flash = Off

You can't make anybody out, but it has a cool, surreal kind of feel. (Yes, the DJ in this photo is wearing a mouse head). The long shutter speed, medium ISO setting, and lack of a flash to freeze the action creates a blurring effect that helps establish movement in the shot. You don't want all your photos to look like everyone is stuck in stone, some blur and light trails is a good way to show action & motion in

nightclub & concert photography. As seen above, bright stage lights hitting smoke from a fog machine creates a very unique look too.

It helps to always be aware of what the light guy is doing, as well as the progression of a song. Generally in dance music, there is a peak moment of a track, and at this moment is when the light guy will throw on the strobe lights and hit the smoke machines. When strobe lights go on, you'll have to dial down your aperture and speed up your shutter quite a bit, otherwise your shot will be totally overexposed. These peak times of the night are also when the crowd throws their hands up in the air. You want to make sure you catch the crowd with their hands in the air as much as possible, as these shots are what every club owner, promoter, & DJ wants to see. If you can get good at timing what the light guys are going to do, you can get some really great crowd and club atmosphere shots. I also recommend talking with the light guys and getting to know them. Many times they will be happy to adjust the lighting for you, if you are trying to capture a certain type of shot. But only if you're nice.

## H. Camera Settings: DJs & Performers



F = 5.0 / Shutter = 1/8 sec / ISO = 1000 / Flash = Off

The other important group of photos you will be taking at nightclubs and especially concerts is shots of the DJ, Band, Go Go Dancers, and other performers. The major difference between shots of performers and close-ups of people at the club is that the DJs, Bands, and Go Go Dancers are constantly moving around. They rarely stop moving to pose for you. So you'll need to use a faster shutter speed to capture them without blurring, but you still want to try and capture good ambient light and color effects. The photo above

was taken with my flash off, but with a fast enough shutter speed to freeze the action. Good shutter speeds to use for action shots of dancers, bands and DJs are in the  $1/8^{\text{th}}$  of a second up to  $1/60^{\text{th}}$  of a second range. You can go faster if you want, but you'll lose a lot of the ambient light effects. I like to keep the shutter as slow as possible without blurring the photo too much. This may take some test shots to see what works with the light situation in the club you happen to be in. To make sure the photo was bright enough in the photo above; my ISO was set to 1000. I did this because I didn't use a flash for that shot. If I had used a flash, I would have kept my ISO around 400 or so. The high 1000 ISO setting resulted in some minor sensor noise, which was cleaned up in post processing.

Again, the exact settings you would use will depend on the amount of light available in the venue, and on the performer. If there are really bright spot lights on the performer, dial down your aperture (raise the f-stop number) to let less light in to your camera. If the light level is low, open up the aperture as wide as it can go (smallest f-stop number). The other option is to use your flash if you're allowed to. Remember that setting your flash to 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain Sync will make it fire at

the end of the shot, freezing your subject in place. When using a flash, you don't need or want to have a high ISO setting, as high ISO settings result in less detail in the picture, and are not needed when using a flash.

When getting shots of DJs, Bands, or Dancers, make sure to get photos from many different angles and locations. One of the major keys to great nightclub photography is taking a whole mess of photos. Because you can't control the light, or the subject in nightclub photography, the more photos you take the better the chances that you'll get one or two stunning images. I like to take images of the DJ from 4 main angles. Right in front of them, from both sides, and from behind the DJ looking out on the crowd. A great nightclub photographer will be constantly moving around finding the best angles to shoot performers from. If you're lazy about moving all over the place, your photos will show it. No one wants to see 4 different shots of a dancer or band member from the exact same spot. Keep the angles diverse and interesting. If you happen to be stuck in "the pit" in front of the stage at a concert, still try to move around as much as possible within the pit to keep your shots interesting.

# I. Special Techniques



F = 5.6 / Shutter = .6 sec / ISO = 1250 / Flash = 2<sup>nd</sup> Curtain

## LIGHT TRAILS

One of my favorite nightlife photography techniques can be seen in the photo above. It involves using your camera to paint with light. Notice how the lights from the DJ gear create light trails. The key to this technique is using a longer than normal shutter speed, in this case I used 0.6 seconds. I am also using my flash in 2<sup>nd</sup> Sync Mode as well, to freeze the action when the shutter closes. The first step in

accomplishing this type of photo is to frame your subject in the viewfinder, and focus where you want to. After you press the shutter, quickly jerk the camera in a certain direction, then right back to where you started. In this case, I moved the camera left and then back to where I started. This has to happen very fast, because you want the shutter to close back where you started, and you literally only have 0.6 seconds to do it. So don't move the camera too much, just a quick side to side or up/down motion with your wrists. What this does is that anything with bright lights coming from it will create a light trail in the same direction you move your camera. Then the flash will fire right before the shutter closes, freezing your subject. You end up with a very cool special effect that works great for shots of performers.

Don't limit yourself to one type of motion either. You can move your camera side to side, diagonally, zoom the lens in and out, and even rotate it in a small circle. Experiment and find out what cool effects you can create. Twisting your camera back and forth in a half circle with a long shutter speed can create a type of worm-hole effect that is fun to use with shots of Go Go dancers, as they generally have some powerful lights aimed at them. When using the Light Trail



technique, it is best to only include a couple of photos like this into a party gallery. This technique is easily and frequently overused, but in moderation it can add some creativity to your photos and make you really stand out as a nightclub & concert photographer.

## OFF CAMERA FLASH

Another special nightclub & concert photography technique is to get your flash off your camera body. This can be done with an [Off Camera Shoe Cord](#), or a Wireless Flash System. This allows for greater options on light position, which can create some unique and interesting effects.



F = 3.5 / Shutter = .5 sec / ISO = 800 / Flash = Off Camera (High and to the Left)

Some photographers use a flash bracket like the [Stroboframe Flip Flash Bracket](#), in combination with either of these systems, while others just hand hold the flash. The major benefit of a bracket is that you still have use of both hands when shooting photos while your flash is in a position that reduces glare and hot spots that can show up on people's faces. The major benefit of hand holding the flash is a greater variety of lighting positions. You can hold the flash low, high, have someone else aim the flash from the side, or even put the flash down on a table or the floor, even across the room, aiming light from a unique angle.

## **J. Post Processing Techniques**

To make your nightclub or concert photos REALLY stand out from everyone else, I highly recommend doing some basic post processing in Adobe Photoshop and/or Adobe Bridge. Now, you don't want to spend days post processing 200 photos. But if you plan to create a smaller gallery (which is what I recommend), then post processing is

the way to go. It is better to have a handful of great photos than hundreds of mediocre ones.

## **Adobe Bridge:**

If you have Adobe Bridge, and are shooting in RAW format, you have some great adjustments to play with. When you edit photos in RAW format, it's like you are changing the settings right inside the camera. These are the adjustments I play with. Once in Adobe Bridge, right click on a photo and select "Open in Camera RAW".

**Exposure:** Sometimes a shot may come out a bit too bright, or too dark. With this adjustment, you can dial in the exposure just the way you want it.

**Recovery:** Increase this setting to recover a bit of lost shadows and detail. Only a little though, too much will darken the photo and make it look strange.

**Fill Light:** I don't mess with this much, but I will if I want to increase the background ambient light level a little bit.

**Contrast:** Bump it up to about 35 to make your photos pop!  
Don't do it too much though, or they will look "over-processed".

**Clarity:** My favorite setting. Helps clear & sharpen the photo a bit, helping to show detail. Only go to about 10 or 20 though. Too much will look "over-processed".

**Photoshop:** I then send the photo to Photoshop for some additional work.

## **Adobe Photoshop:**

If the only photo program you have is Adobe Photoshop, these are the post processing techniques I recommend.

**Color Correction:** I don't generally color correct every photo. If a few of them have too much of an obvious red hue, I'll just use adjust it under the *Image > Adjustments > Hue & Saturation* menu.

**Contrast:** Contrast is good. Very good. Adding some contrast to all your photos will really make them pop. You can find it under *Image > Adjustments > Brightness/Contrast* menu. I'll usually increase contrast by 35 units.

**Sharpness:** I increase sharpness using Photoshop CS4's new Smart Sharpen feature. You can find it under *Filter > Sharpen > Smart Sharpen*. I set the Amount to 70%, the Radius to 1.0, and under the *Remove* drop down box select "*Lens Blur*".

**Noise Reduction:** If I used a high ISO to make a photo, and I get a bunch of sensor noise, I will run it through a noise reduction plug-in within Photoshop. The plug-in I use is called "Dfine 2.0".

**Cropping:** If I have plenty of time to set up for a shot, I usually won't need to crop it later on. But when I "shoot from the hip" and aim my camera at something without looking through the viewfinder, I may need to crop the image later to make it look it's best.

These are the basic post processing techniques I use. If I get a great photo of someone important, or extremely sexy, I may do a little quick airbrushing to hide a blemish or hide sweat drops. Now I only recommend using these post processing techniques if you only have 20-40 photos to do. If you are working for a Big Box type website (ex: NapkinNights.com), one who just wants you to take as many photos as possible and post them all, don't spend all kinds of time post processing 200 photos unless they are paying you well. Time is money!

## **K. Tips for Your First Events**

Now some tips for your first events as a nightclub or concert photographer. Remember that the key to a great nightclub or concert photo gallery is VARIETY. No one wants to just see 40 photos of couples. Get photos of the dancers. Get photos of the performers. Get shots of the crowd. Get shots of the club. Get shots of the people waiting in line. Get shots of the bartenders & bouncers. Get a shot of the nightclub or venue's signage. You want anyone viewing your

photo gallery to feel like they were at the party with you, even if they didn't go.

Direct your subjects! Try and get people to do crazy things in front of your camera. Get girls to kiss each other, get guys to make funny faces, etc. Keep it interesting. One thing I like to do before taking shots of a large crowd is to throw my hands up in the air at them. When they see you waving your hands in the air with your camera, they'll figure out what you want them to do for the photo. Shots of a large crowd with their hands in the air are pure gold.

You'll make people feel much more at ease with you if you have a drink in your hand and a smile on your face. If you don't drink, get a tonic water with lime. Make it look like you're drinking. Dress nice like everyone else would for a night on the town. If you look like you're just there to party with everyone else, you'll get a much better response from people. Enjoy yourself! Your attitude will rub off on the subjects you're photographing.

Keep moving. Get shots from all corners of the venue, and from right smack dab in the middle too. If you can get on stage, make sure to get close ups of the band or DJ, as well as wide angle shots of crowd. If it's a DJ event, don't shoot the back of the DJ's head. Get over to the side or right in front to get good headshots. If you get in front of the performer(s), make it quick. You don't want to block the crowd's view.

Make sure you have plenty of camera memory. I like to have at least 8GB worth. The worst thing is running out of memory only half way through the night. Also make sure to have plenty of batteries if you are using a flash.

Get shots from many different angles. Head on, kneeling on the floor, above your head, extreme close ups, etc. Keep it mixed, and just keep shooting. You're better off shooting 400 photos and picking through the best ones rather than shooting only 100. Sure you'll get some bad shots, but if you take a ton of photos you'll end up with plenty of keepers.



## L. Making Money

When you first start off taking nightclub or concert photos, I recommend doing quite a few shows for free. Nightclubs, Bands, and Promoters are not going to pay for photos unless they are amazing. You'll want to practice as much as you can until you know exactly what you are doing. You'll need to be able to manually adjust camera and flash settings on the fly to capture the perfect moments in these unique environments.

Start by taking photos for smaller local bands or nightclubs. Contact the band, promoter, or nightclub and tell them you will shoot their event for free in exchange for "camera clearance". Do this until you are confident in your nightclub & concert photography abilities, while building up a strong portfolio of your work. If you're doing events for free, make sure to "watermark" your photos with your name or company logo so you at least get some advertising out of your work. Don't make it too big, and keep it in the corner of your photos.

Keep an online portfolio of your best shots. A great way to do that is through [Smug Mug](#). It's a slick and polished web based photo portfolio where you are also able to sell prints of your images, without having to worry about actually doing the printing, framing, & mailing yourself. By having a slick online portfolio, you are able to show off your work to potential clients like bands, promoters, and nightclub managers. The more professional you can make yourself, the more serious people will take you.

I also recommend making up some well designed business cards. Business cards serve multiple purposes. They are the best way to introduce yourself to potential clients. Adding the web address for your online photo portfolio along with your other contact info on your business card lets a potential client browse your work at his or her leisure. You are able to hand out hundreds of these to anyone you meet who may have the power to land you a nightclub or concert photography gig. I get all my business cards made up at a company called [PS Print](#). Best quality I've found at the best price, and a super fast turnaround. If you don't have a friend who knows graphic design, you can try to design one using a template or the company can design

a card for you too. The other great thing about business cards is you can hand them out to every person you take a photo of at a nightclub or concert. This is a powerful way to drive traffic to your photo website, and possibly sell some prints through [Smug Mug](#) at the same time. I guarantee that everyone you take a photo of and hand a card too (who doesn't drunkenly lose it) will be on your website in the next day or two looking for their photo. If they like what they see, they can buy a print right from the site. This is also a great way to get other types of photography business as well, from all these random strangers you took photos of. If they love your work, they'll remember you and keep your card for when they need a photographer in the future. You never know who you may hand a card too. I can't tell you how much headshot business I've received this way over the years, as well as increased nightclub and concert gigs. This is also how I landed my first job as an official festival photographer. I happened to take a great photo and hand a card to the right person. So make sure you buy plenty of business cards. Plan on taking 200 photos next Friday night? Keep 200 business cards in your camera bag. The worst thing that can happen is to run out of them in the middle of a party, because NO ONE will remember your website if you have to scream it too them

over the music. Don't miss a potential business opportunity, make sure you have a card to hand them instead.

Once you have a strong portfolio of work that you're proud of, it's time to hit the pavement. Set up a meeting with every nightclub, promoter, and band you can find in your area. Find out if they already have a photographer working for them. If not, sell yourself to them. I'll go over some good things to say in a little bit. If they already have someone, make sure to give them a business card and let them know that you are willing to fill in should they ever need a second photographer. You never know. Maybe their guy will get sick, or quit. You want to be on the top of their list if an opening appears. Remember to follow up with everyone you visit every few months, so you stay fresh in their mind.

## **How to Sell Yourself**

To land paying nightclub & concert gigs, you have to provide a valuable service to a promoter, venue, or band. Sometimes you have to convince these people that your service is valuable. Here's the stuff I say:

*“Take a look at all the most successful nightclubs, bands, and promoters in the country and you’ll see one thing they all have in common. A really good photographer is working for them. Professional photography is the ultimate marketing and advertising medium. It is a complete visual representation of your parties & events. Photos are worth 1000 words, that’s why a strong photo gallery of past events is 1000 times better at promoting future parties than a flyer that looks just like everyone else’s flyer. Party photos are easy to share by email, MySpace, Facebook, ect. When someone has a great photo taken of themselves at a club, they share it with all their friends. They’ll visit your website the very next day to check themselves out. Let your customer’s market your events FOR YOU. People are visual creatures. If they can feel like they are at a party just by looking at a computer screen, you’ll have them hooked in no time. As a skilled nightclub & concert photographer, I know how to make a party look like the best party in town even if it’s not. I know how to make your customers feel special. Who doesn’t want to feel like a rockstar or model when they go out for a night on the town? Having me at your event creates excitement. To a regular guy or girl who slaves away their week in a job they hate, going out to the club or a concert is a way to escape. They can pretend to be someone they’re not. Having the “paparazzi” at your event feeds into this fantasy. It is really one of the most valuable kinds of marketing you can do for your events, at a very affordable price. But because the photos will be representing your brand of events and venue, you want to make*

*sure and hire an experienced and competent photographer who specializes in nightclub & concert environments. Like me.”*

## **Photo Blogs**

The newest trend for nightclub & concert photographers is keeping a blog of their photo galleries. This helps attract additional website traffic from people searching for info on an event you may have photographed. It's also a good way to increase your income from selling photos on your blog. I'm not going to go into any depth about running and maintaining a blog, but here are some of my favorite and most popular nightclub & concert photo blogs from around the country. Check them out and get ideas for creating your own.

[DigitalFrog](#)

[Tom Horton](#)

[iShootShows](#)

[Everyone Is Famous](#)

[HiFi NYC](#)

[Miami Nights](#)

[Daniel Diaz](#)

[Cobra Snake](#)

## **How Much to Charge**

This is going to depend on many different factors. How much experience you have, what city you live in, what the budget is for your client, etc. I'm going to say it can be anywhere from \$50 to \$300 per shoot. Small bars and local bands are going to have small budgets for photography, or none at all. So it may take some convincing.

Unfortunately most people think photography consists of just taking basic photos. They don't see the post processing, editing, experience, and time it takes to create a powerful nightlife photo gallery. Don't assume they know about that effort, make it clear to them. I make sure people know that it takes me about 5 hours worth of work to complete a nightclub or concert photo shoot from start to finish. About 2 hours of actual shooting, along with another 3 hours of editing, uploading, backing up images, etc. So you are going to have to charge what you think 5 hours of your time is worth. For me, it's about \$300. But I've been doing this for a while, and my high end clients can

afford to pay that much. If you're just starting out, you may have to start your pricing at a lower range. It may be worth charging less to clients who agree to hire you every week on an ongoing basis, for a consistent stream of income. Charge more for one-off events.

## **M. Conclusion**

Nightclub & Concert Photography is a fast growing business that caters to the many nightclubs, promoters, and bands that keep popping up all over the place these days. It is a fantastic way to earn some extra income on nights and weekends, while being incredibly fun at the same time. Use the tips & techniques in this guide to become a more proficient nightclub & concert photographer. Once you become skilled enough and well known for your quality of work, you can even make a full time living just from nightlife photography. Find out what your clients want and need from you, and deliver it to them to get hired back again and again. If you want to make a good living with photography, you are going to have to work hard to sell yourself & your services. You can't just sit back on your ass and expect people to



come knocking. Let your artistic side show through your work, and above all, enjoy yourself! After all, you're getting paid to party!

**Interested in making some great money promoting this book?**

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